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ABSTRACT

Improving communication among and between men and women is an important part of leadership which entails understanding cultural stereotypes related to masculinity and femininity and understanding that all individuals possess a combination of masculine and feminine traits. Leaders should strive to create a new culture where feminine values are celebrated alongside masculine traits. With respect to communication, they should accept men's and women's unique conversational styles and rituals and be aware of small talk habits and nonverbal behaviors. Studies have shown that conversational rituals common among men often involve the use of opposition (e.g., banter, joking, teasing, and playful put-downs) and efforts to avoid the one-down position in interaction. Conversational rituals common among women, however, are often ways of maintaining an appearance of equality and of taking into account the effect of the exchange on the other person and expending effort to downplay the speaker's authority. Further, in groups women are more likely to conform to the way that men speak but are less likely to be listened to, regardless of how they speak or what they say. Understanding what goes on when people talk to each other is the best way to improve communication in the workplace and in all aspects of life. Contains 13 references. (TGI)

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GENDER ISSUES AND LEADERSHIP:

HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AMONG AND BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

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GENDER ISSUES AND LEADERSHIP: HOW TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AMONG AND BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

"You know the feeling: You meet someone for the first time, and it's as if you've known each other all your lives. Everything goes smoothly. You know just what she means; she knows just what you mean. You laugh at the same time. Your sentences and hers have a perfect rhythm. You feel terrific; you're doing everything right. And you think she's terrific, too.

But you also know the other feeling: You meet someone, you try to be friendly, to make a good impression, but everything goes wrong. There are uncomfortable silences. You fish for topics. You bump into each other as you both start at once and then both stop. You start to say something interesting but he cuts you off. You try to lighten the mood and he looks as if you punched him in the stomach. He says what may be intended as a joke but is more rude than funny. Whatever you do to make things better makes them worse." (Tannen, 1986, p. 17)

Part of the art of leadership requires good communication. It is no surprise to read in De Pree (1989) "good communication means a respect for individuals." (p. 91) It also makes us more aware of the meaning of working together. "Only through good communication can we learn the needs and demands of our customers,. Only through good communication can we convey and preserve a common corporate vision ... Good communication liberates us to do our jobs better." (De Pree, p. 94)

As a people we need to work on valuing and accepting diversity. We generally try to put each other into the mold we are most comfortable with, irregardless of the gifts and talents of the individual. Everyone's gifts and talents are necessary. Affirming one another is not a common practice. (Dockery & Seagren, 1995)

De Pree (1989) states that "the art of leadership dwells a good deal in the future ..." (p. 117) Leadership intertwines the most important aspects of an organization: its people and its future.

Leaders, according to Bennis (1989), have nothing but themselves to work with ...we are our own "raw material". "Leaders are self-directed, but learning and understanding are the keys to self direction, and it is in our relationships with others that we learn about ourselves." (Bennis, p. 63)

In the end, it is crucial that we remember that we cannot become what we need to be by continuing to be what we are.

In an age of growing respect for individuals, we can accept that "masculine" and "feminine" traits are cultural stereotypes and that, truly, most people are a mix of both.

> The following traits, however, are said to be "masculine": "aggression, competitiveness, rational thought and behavior, wisdom, practicality, objectivity, protectiveness, heroism, goal orientation, courage, risk taking, linear thinking, creativity at the highest levels and the ability to plan and organize on a grand scale.

> Women are said to be: passive, compassionate, nurturing, intuitive, cooperative, emotional, subjective, impractical, conciliatory, dependent, relationship oriented, sympathetic, empathetic, creative on the "lower" levels, i.e., crafts and home decorating, capable of sensing natural cycles and flows.
>
> Many women would reject passive, impractical and 'lower level creativity' as negative, illustrative of a male concept of femininity or simply inaccurate. On the masculine list, few people find aggression, on of the male traits, very attractive. And many of us think competitiveness, especially in an interpersonal environment, is unhealthy." (Auberdene & Naisbitt, 1992, p. 261)

The point Auberdene & Naisbitt (1992) make is successful individuals posses a combination of masculine and feminine traits. The most creative are a mixture of presumably conflicting characteristics: competitive and compassionate; goal-oriented and nurturing; intuitive and risk taking. Cardboard, one-dimensional females and males alike are doomed to failure.

They further claim that the task we have before us is to *"create* a new culture where feminine values are celebrated alongside positive masculine traits." (p. 264)

Tannen (1994) reminds us that gender is only one of many influences on conversational style. Each of us has our own unique style, shaped by a personal history of many influences such as geographic region, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, occupation, religion, and age — as well as a unique personality and spirit.

"Despite good intentions and good character all around — our own (which we take for granted) and other's (which we easily doubt) — we find ourselves caught in miscommunication because the very methods — and the only methods — we have of communicating are not, as they seem, self-evident and 'logical.' Instead, they differ from person to person, especially in a society like ours where individuals come from such varied cultural backgrounds." (Tannen, 1986, p. 26)

According to Tannen (1994), the behaviors that make up our lives are ritualized and this is why ways of talking, like other ways of conducting our daily lives, come to seem natural.

"Conversational rituals common among men often involve using opposition such as banter, joking, teasing and playful put-down and expending effort to avoid the one-down position in the interaction. Conversational rituals common among women are often ways of maintaining an appearance of equality, taking into account the effect of the exchange on the other person, and expending effort to downplay the speaker's authority so they can get the job done without flexing their muscles in an obvious way." (Tannen, 1994, p. 5)

These conventions work well when, in fact, every one is familiar with these rituals. When, however, these ways of speaking are not recognized as conventions, the result is less since they are taken literally.

Both women's and men's characteristic ways of speaking make sense and are deemed equally valid in themselves even though the difference in styles may cause trouble in interaction. Tannen (1994) states that, in general, workplaces that have previously had men in positions of power have already established male-style interaction as the norm. In that regard, women, and others whose styles are different, are not starting out equal, but are at a disadvantage.

There definitely is a difference in the way women are "heard" or paid attention to by males. One's communication skills can be flawless but, if the opposite sex is not valued, either consciously or unconsciously, the communication process is hindered.

Though the ways women speak may contribute to their not being listened to, research shows that, with all else being equal, women are not as likely to be listened to as men, irregardless of how they speak or what they say.

The dilemma of getting heard can be experienced by any individuals who are not as resolute as others about standing their ground, do not speak as firmly at meetings, or do not begin with a high level of credibility, as a result of rank, regional or ethnic style differences, or just personality, regardless of whether they are female or male. Whoever is more committed to compromise and achieving consensus, and less comfortable with strife, is more likely to give way.

"It is frequently observed that male speakers are more likely to be confrontational by arguing, issuing commands, taking opposing stands for the sake of argument, whereas females are more likely to avoid confrontation by agreeing, supporting and making suggestions rather than commands." (Tannen, 1994, p. 236)

Some men and most women have the experience of "saying something at a meeting and having it ignored, then hearing the same comment taken up when it is repeated by someone else (nearly always a man)." (Tannen, 1994, p. 27)

Women, especially, try to avoid seeming presumptuous "by prefacing their statements with a disclaimer such as, 'I don't know if this will work, but ...', or 'You've probably already thought of this, but ...'". (Tannen, 1994, p. 279)

Some speakers (again, including many women) may also speak at a lower volume and try to be succinct so they don't take up more meeting time than necessary.

"All these aspects of how one speaks at a meeting mean that when two people say 'the same thing,' they probably say it very differently. They may speak with or without a disclaimer, loudly or softly, in a self-deprecating or declamatory way, briefly or at length, and tentatively or with apparent certainty. They may initiate ideas or support or argue against ideas raised by others. When dissenting, they may adopt a conciliatory tone, mitigating the disagreement, or an adversarial one, emphasizing it." (Tannen, 1994, p. 280)

Apologizing, softening criticism, and thanking are rituals that can be used by women or men. They are more often found in the speech of women.

Tannen (1994) explains that talk at work is not restricted to talk about work. Some time is spent in casual chat that establishes the friendly working environment that is the necessary setting to getting work done. It is easier to approach someone with a work-related issue if you are comfortable in each other's presence and the lines of communication are open. A primary way such working relationships are established is through informal, nonwork talk. Both men and women engage in nonwork chat at work, but what they are likely to talk about, and how, are often different.

Many women mix business with talk about their personal lives and expect that other women will, also; they may see women who do not engage in personal chat as cold, aloof, or "not a people person". Men are more likely to mix business talk with repartee about sports or politics. Everyone can see the interest value of the type of small talk they themselves engage in, but they are likely to regard as "trivial" the type of small talk they don't happen to enjoy. It's common to hear men complain about or mock women's interest in talking about clothes and personal details, and common to hear women complain about or mock men's interest in sports.

It is recognized that differences in small-talk habits "can become very big when they get in the way of the day-to-day working relationships that make us feel comfortable at work and keep the lines of communication open for the big topics when they arise". (Tannen, 1994, p. 64)

Small talk is a necessity in the work environment in that it functions as the grease that keeps the gears running in an office.

The term "marked" is a staple of linguistic theory. "Marked" refers to the way language "alters the base meaning of a word by adding something — a little linguistic addition that has no meaning on its own". (Tannen, 1994, p. 108) The unmarked form of a word carries the meaning that inherently goes without saying.

The unmarked case is (being) male. Endings such as *ESS & ETTE* mark words as female and, by association, tend to mark them for frivolousness. For example, women's styles get scrutinized; men's styles have the option of being unmarked.

"Women can't even fill out a form without telling stories about themselves" (Tannen, 1994, p. 111) such as Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms. and hyphenated surname. "In a setting where most of the players are men there is no unmarked woman." (Tannen, 1994, p. 112)

Research attests to the fact that "when females and males get together in groups, the females are more likely to change their styles to adapt to the presence of males — whether they are adults or children." (Tannen, 1994, p. 119)

Metamessages are what is communicated about relationships — attitudes toward each other, the occasion, and what we are saying. The metamessages are what we react to most strongly. Someone who, with a hard set jaw hisses out "I'm not angry" causes us to believe the metamessage conveyed by the way he said it — that he is.

American men's information-focused approach to talk has shaped the American way of doing business. "Getting down to brass tacks," not "wasting time" in small talk (social talk), or "beating

around the bush." Small talk is necessary to establish the social relationship that must provide the foundation for conducting business.

It appears that women have better skills in dealing with people than men have and "because businesses are people places, women have an advantage". (Price, 1984, p. 185) Women are skilled at understating "where other people are coming from and tailoring what they say in a way that is appropriate to a specific customer." (Price, p. 185) Women, more than men, often offer a part of themselves in communication and listeners tend to realize that.

Price (1984) claims that "women are not afraid to cooperate in the interest of getting a job done." (p. 185) They are task focused and less into a need to grab credit or be involved in power plays.

The conversational signals of "pacing, pausing, loudness, and pitch are used to carry on the business of taking turn in conversation; relating ideas to each other and showing what the point is; and showing how we feel about what we're saying and about the person we're saying it to. These are the signals that combine with what is said to make up the devices we use to show we're listening, interested, sympathetic, or teasing — and that we're the right sort of people.

These conversational signals and devices are normally invisible, the silent and hidden gears that drive conversations. We don't pay attention to the gears unless something seems to have gone wrong." (Tannen, 1986, p. 61)

These conversational signals "make up the *how* of talk. *What* we say is also an important clue to what we mean, but we don't always say what we mean in so many words. We balance the conflicting needs for involvement and independence by hinting and picking up hints, by refraining from saying some things and surmising what other people mean from what they refrain from saying. Linguists refer to the way people mean what they don't exactly say as *indirectness*. (Tannen,1986, p.65)

"It is important not to take ways of speaking too literally. They are rituals. And learning to understand the rituals will make it easier to understand the results that occur when the rituals others are following are not those you instinctively understand." (Tannen, 1994, p. 308)

"The most important key is understanding the parameters of conversational style, which provides the tools to become more flexible not only in your own way of speaking but, equally important, in interpreting how others mean what they say, and in evaluating others' abilities. Understanding what goes on when people talk to each other is the best way to improve communication — and get more work done — in the workplace as in all aspects of our lives." (Tannen, 1994, p. 309)

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